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TAGS: PREL NATO MARR PGOV AL

SUBJECT: PM BERISHA DISCUSSES ALBANIA'S NATO ACCESSION  
PROSPECTS WITH PERMREPS JANUARY 30

REF: A. NATO PO(2008)0011

¶B. STATE 8149

¶C. STATE 8781

Classified By: DCM Richard G Olson for reasons 1.4 (b), (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Prime Minister Berisha discussed Albania's prospects for being invited to join NATO at the Bucharest Summit with the NAC on January 30, concluding Albania's ninth MAP cycle. The participation of opposition figures in his delegation, a recent unanimous parliamentary motion of support for NATO integration, and recent tangible progress on key reforms favorably impressed PermReps. Berisha addressed the main shortcomings identified in the MAP report by promising a new law on the judiciary by the NATO Summit and a new civil registry that would allow for accurate voter registration in advance of Albania's next elections. He cited strong economic figures, Albania's efforts to maintain stability in the Balkans, and its contribution to NATO-led operations to demonstrate the value it would bring to the Alliance. Ambassador Nuland saluted Albania's rapid progress during the last MAP cycle and emphasized the need to "keep your foot on the gas" to close the remaining shortcomings. Berisha responded to 21 interventions in turn, assuring NATO reps that Albania would spare no effort to maintain regional stability, continue to support NATO-led operations, and press ahead with domestic reforms to the Bucharest Summit and beyond. End Summary.

A MULTI-PARTY DELEGATION

¶2. (C) Albanian Prime Minister Sali Berisha, accompanied by Foreign Minister Lulzim Basha, Defense Minister Fatmir Mediu, Parliamentary Integration Committee Chairman Ilir Meta, and Deputy Speaker Ylli Bufi, met with NATO PermReps on January 30 to discuss Albania's Membership Action Plan (MAP) progress report (REF). This discussion concluded Albania's ninth MAP cycle and was Tirana's best opportunity to convince Allies of its readiness to receive an invitation to joint the Alliance at NATO's Bucharest Summit in April. The fact that Meta (a former PM and FM) and Bufi represent opposition parties was favorably noted by Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, Ambassador Nuland, and many other PermReps.

PM BERISHA: GOOD PROGRESS TO REPORT

¶3. (C) Berisha stressed that Albania's accelerated push for reform during the shortened, eight-month MAP cycle was irreversible and sustainable. Berisha reported recent progress in addressing electoral and judicial reforms ) the

areas the MAP progress report had identified as Albania's primary weaknesses ) and added that multi-party parliamentary committees were continuing to work these issues with the shared goal of meeting NATO's performance-based criteria for membership by Bucharest. He said that 70 percent of the necessary judicial legislation had been adopted and that electoral reforms recommended by the OSCE and OKIHR were systematically being addressed. Berisha cited six percent annual growth, 87 percent increase in foreign direct investment over the last year, and the imposition of a flat 10 percent tax to demonstrate that a sound, free-market economy underlies Albania's democratic and security institutions. He also drew on statistics to show tangible progress in the fight against corruption.

#### A SECURITY PROVIDER

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¶4. (C) On security issues, Berisha said that President Topi had stressed during his recent trip to Pristina the need for all sides to remain calm and act with moderation. He also emphasized the need to safeguard the Serbian minority in Kosovo. To underscore Albania's role as a security provider beyond the Balkans, Berisha announced plans to build up its ISAF contribution by standing up Operational Mentoring and Liaison Teams (OMLTs) and to support Operation Active Endeavor (OAE) in the Mediterranean. Berisha noted that 2.1 percent of GDP is allocated to the defense budget in 2008 and the Albanian Armed Forces will be fully professional by 2010. Finally, he summarized other wide-ranging reforms of the armed forces, an area of strength recognized in the MAP report.

#### AMBASSADOR NULAND: PEDAL TO THE METAL

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¶5. (C) Since the U.S. holds responsibility for NATO's Contact Point Embassy (CPE) in Tirana, Ambassador Nuland opened

Allied interventions by stating that the U.S. was pleased with Albania's rapid progress toward MAP standards. It had proven itself a good mentor to Kosovo and a security exporter to Afghanistan and Iraq. She stated that each aspirant nation would be judged on its own merits at Bucharest, and that President Bush wanted the largest performance-based enlargement possible at the Bucharest Summit. She urged Berisha to "keep your foot on the gas" to fulfill judicial and electoral reform targets.

#### MAKING FRIENDS AND INFLUENCING PERMREPS

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¶6. (C) Twenty more PermReps spoke, most acknowledging the unanimous support of Albania's parliament and 90 percent of its people for NATO accession, Tirana's contributions to NATO-led operations, and its solid record of defense reform. The most vocally supportive were Turkey, Poland, Italy, Romania, Portugal, and the three Baltic Allies. France was also surprisingly positive, with Ambassador Duque confessing that he had been favorably impressed during a visit to Tirana, voicing support for Albania's aspirations, and hoping for a favorable outcome at Bucharest. Many other Ambassadors also expressed appreciation for having been hosted in Tirana by the GOA.

#### REMAINING JUDICIAL AND ELECTORAL HURDLES

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¶7. (C) At the same time, every intervention pointed to the need for Albania to finalize legislation on judicial reform and to implement the electoral reforms that had been set in motion. Most also cited the need to accelerate the fight against corruption, organized crime, and trafficking. The UK, Czech Republic, Greece, and Bulgaria stressed the imperative of achieving more tangible results by Bucharest ) "much more needs to be done," in the words of British Ambassador Eldon. On electoral reform, Eldon cited the need to address the so-called &Dushk8 effect (which derives its name from an Albanian village), by which major parties divert votes in specific constituencies to junior partners in order to maximize their results. As the MAP report states, the Dushk effect "distorts the will of the electors and creates a

system of dependency for the smaller parties, since the goodwill of a larger party is crucial to get seats in Parliament." Greece emphasized the need for further legal, administrative, and banking sector reforms to encourage foreign investment. Both Greece and Bulgaria called for respecting minority education and property rights. (One of our Albanian counterparts commented to us afterward that their interventions appeared to be coordinated.)

POINT-BY-POINT RESPONSES

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¶8. (C) Berisha responded to each Ambassador in turn, starting by saluting the role of U.S. Embassy Tirana as NATO's CPE. On the common themes of judicial and electoral shortcomings, he promised passage of a comprehensive law on the judiciary by the Bucharest Summit at the beginning of April. Doing it systematically, he emphasized, took time, and demonstrated Albania's commitment to sustainable reforms. On electoral reform, he reported that Parliamentary committees were reviewing various European models, and that the basis for a sound voter registration system was being laid with an all-new national civil registry database that would be completed in July. He assured NATO reps that Albania would spare no effort to maintain peace in the region, particularly preventing any spillover of unrest in Kosovo. On cooperation among parties, he pointed out that Albania's decentralization process was in effect ceding authority from the ruling Democratic Party in the central government to more opposition-led local governments. He pointed to minorities, including Greek Albanians, in government positions. Finally, to impress Allies with Albania's unity of purpose, FM Basha turned over his chair to Meta to re-affirm the opposition's support for meeting the goals to merit membership in NATO. The SecGen closed the meeting by observing that "if you rest on your laurels, you are wearing them in the wrong place."

NULAND